

## “The Boy Beneath the Boughs”

The boy lay in the woods with a hole in his side, not knowing where the bullet had come from nor why. The shroud of twilight fell on the land, darkening the vale between the twin hills and bringing with it the cold, a cold that failed to diffuse his sweating. Owls hooted in the boughs and critters scabbled in the shrubbery, but the boy heard nothing save his own ragged panting and the whisper of war. A crackle of gunfire somewhere in the distance, or in his head, echoing over and over. A grey cap hung on the barrel of his rifle, the gun sat propped against his trembling thighs, and he himself rested against a moaning, nearly leafless oak. The majestic tree had shed its leaves all through the autumn, carpeting the ground with a soft layer of gold. His head resting against the trunk, the boy felt comfortable enough to die there without too much complaint if his mind would leave him alone.

But like bursts of artillery, searing shards of memory flashed in front of his wide eyes, harrying the peace that should come before death.

As hard as he tried, he could not summon many memories from the days before he had donned the grey uniform and the grey cap and the leather boots. All that was left was the maelstrom that followed; blaring trumpets, screaming horses, the thunder of marching thousands, the baying of hounds and the groans of future ghosts; fluttering flags, trampled lands, the whites of eyes and every hue of red; smoking powders, burning iron, seared twisted steel and the fetor of the fallen.

Before the days in the grey uniform, the ghostly reminder of a wailing mother and the vanishing outlines of a village emptied of its men.

The pictures came unasked for, unwanted, fading images of that late summer day when the army had stomped into the village, across the bridge, beneath the arch and down the narrow road. A company of scarred men, bearded men and tanned men filthier than vagrants. Men with knives, men with guns and a man with arms like the trunks of a tree. Most of them glared and some of them grinned as they waited under the

sun, spitting brown tobacco into the dust.

"Boys," the captain bellowed to the gathered townsfolk and mothers clutching their sons, "your nation needs you, your enemies hate you and your fathers have died for you! Your time has come, at dawn we march to glory and at dusk you become men."

The boys would have wailed as loud as the women if the captain had not been staring at them, frightening them into silence and strength. He barked some orders and his soldiers looted the village. Bread and boots and bottles of brandy for the grim men who gave their lives for their country. The sun fell and, as was usual in the dark of those nights, the blasts of cannons began throbbing in the distance. Bright flares lit up the sky, spurts of fire one could easily have mistaken for fireworks.

The boy went home for one last night.

In the house of his childhood, the boy who would become a soldier ate tasteless porridge in silence. He kept his head down and avoided his mother's teary gaze. He ignored the dust streaming from the rafters as the shells shook the earth. His mind was haunted by the captain's eyes and the captain's words. He shoveled spoonful after spoonful until it seemed his belly would burst and then retired to bed without a word.

*Your time has come...*

In the streets of his childhood, the boy crept from shadow to shadow, a pack filled with hard bread, old cheese and a sloshing pouch of water slung over his back and his hat pulled down over his head. He cocked his ears, peered through the gloom and snuck slowly away from his fate. Men patrolled the dark alleyways, boots tapping cobbles and cigarettes hissing in the night. The clouds above had veiled the moon but he knew the village by heart and before long he glimpsed the edge of the woods. A rustling cornfield stretched across the flat land between him and the shadowed outline of trees. He looked over his shoulder at the home he was leaving and thought of his life he was saving.

It was the right decision. He stepped into the cornfield...

*...at dawn we march to glory...*

...but the hand that gripped his arm was harder than steel.

"Where you going, deserter?"

Under a moonless sky, a mother opened the door to the sight of a mean-eyed bear of a man holding her son by the throat. He asked in a vicious whisper if she knew this deserter, this traitor, this boy who had forfeited his honor and therefore his life.

"My son," she croaked. "Give me back my son."

"Penalty's death, ma'am," said the sneering soldier. He began marching away with the boy in haul.

"Wait," she said, sniffing despite the stifling air. "I'll do anything. *Anything*. Just give me back my son."

And the grinning soldier stomped into her home while the boy waited outside. He bit his lips until they were raw and cursed his name under his breath as whimpers fluttered out the windows, louder and louder. Each grunt seemed to pummel his honor, hammer his heart.

*...at dusk you become men.*

A shepherd walked the night road at a gentle pace. His hair and cloak streamed behind him in the wind, both black against the darkness. Wild whispering woods filled the dip in the land between the twin hills, but the shepherd was not afraid. His old walking stick clicked against the packed earth, preceding his booted footfall. Did he sense the boy lying in the woods or hear the rumor of his ragged breathing? None can tell, but the shepherd stepped off the high path and wandered down into the glade, stick clicking and boots crunching the dead leaves.

The boy lay in the woods with a hole in his side and thought back to the mother who had saved his life. *Little use that was*, a black voice hissed, *look at you now. You wasted her sacrifice*. He shook his head in delirious agreement, took in the surrounding woods and eventually decided that the voice was right. Twilight had passed and evening had gone and he was whimpering alone in the dark. Hungry fangs gnawed on his innards and

thirsty needles tore at his throat as the first tendrils of fear clawed at his heart. Realization that he would never see the outside of this glade again struck him. He tried to remember his mother's face, the color of his house's walls, the sound the stream made when it passed beneath the village bridge.

Afar, the relentless rain of fire poured down on the world, lighting up the woods in brief bursts of crimson and orange. Scattered blasts resonated in the grey glade. The chill of night crept down from the autumnal canopy, announcing winter, promising a snow the soldier would never see. A bleak certainty took hold of him.

*I will die here, in a bed of leaves, in a tomb of ice, swallowed by the glade and hidden 'neath Nature's barrow.*

He shot up startled when the shepherd stepped out of the shadows. A gasp caught in his throat, sending arrows of agony through his side. The red hole yawned and the red hole sputtered and the boy fainted from the pain.

A fire crackled beneath the oak, and broth boiled in a black pot over the blaze. The shepherd sat across from the soldier and watched him, eyes shining in the flames. The soldier wriggled awake with fright, hands darting to his throbbing wound. He fingered with surprise the crisp white bandage wrapped around his waist.

*Who is this man that saved me?*

"Have no fear, I think names matter not in these occasions," the man said, as if reading his mind, low voice barely audible over the spitting fire. "I am simply a shepherd from the pastures yonder. And you are simply a boy with a rifle and a hole in his side. That is enough."

"A *soldier*," the need to correct this stranger, futile as it seemed, was strong.

The shepherd nodded as he stirred the soup, adding to the pot some dried laurel, a pinch of salt and the pulp of shiny white berries. Quietly, he served a bowl of the broth and handed it to the boy soldier, along with a pouch of unmixed wine.

"Thank you," the soldier grunted as he grabbed the bowl. His stomach urged him to down the soup, but his wound forced him to do otherwise.

He dipped his lips, savoring the powerful smell, the thick texture, the prickling pleasure of sating his hunger. The broth was good, delicious even. The wine burned his throat but warmed his chest and tingled his fingers. The soldier relaxed.

"Why are you here?" the shepherd asked, reclaiming the wine and taking a swig of it himself.

The boy told his story slowly, sipping soup between words. He told the stranger of his mother's sacrifice, he told the shepherd of his own cowardice, his own fear. He put into words the terror that had filled him as he marched away from his village, lost in the rigid ranks of soldiers pounding the road, heading for war and glory and death.

The shepherd listened attentively.

It was an outcast's tale of banners streaming in the bright blue sky and rifles gleaming in the sun. Soldiers stomping and stopping and starting again. Hard men hating him for having tried to desert; hard elbows in the ribs, hard boots tripping him, hard punches in the night. Days without water, nights without meals. Long walks full of tawdry marching songs about a mother's act of love, but mostly insults and mockeries... even from the other village boys. *They* had not betrayed the trust of the nation.

As they marched to glory, picking up more boys as they went from village to town, through glade and field, over hill and across stream, more and more men hated him.

One afternoon, no different than any other, they spotted the enemy and they all became children again, even the hard men. It was a sight... hundreds and hundreds of soldiers encamped at the foot of a wooded hill. Men with a different colored uniform and different colored banners, but men all the same. At nightfall, bonfires by the dozen constellated the land. And when dawn came, the rumble of machinery rattled the earth as the enemy formed rank upon rank and swallowed the earth. Trumpets sounded the charge, drums pounded the beat and boots battered the

ground. Earth was churned to mud beneath their feet and mud became blood when the first shells fell from the heavens. Screams filled the air, gunfire drowning them out. Shrapnel's deadly hiss ended in shrieks. The sun rose excruciatingly slowly above the smoky, corpse-littered battlefield. The boy remembered asking himself if there had ever been a longer day. Then he remembered being grateful that battle was finally being done so that the abuse would stop.

And in the chaos of battle, in the pits of hell, the soldier saw his chance to flee. His bullet-riddled company lay broken all around him. The captain dragged a legless man through the mud. Two boys from his village, two old friends, had shot each other through the skull rather than fight. The big bear of a man knelt bawling in the middle of the battlefield, a rapist speckled with blood, his evil eyes shedding heavy tears.

The soldier took the chance, without a hint of remorse.

He ran over bodies and crawled through the mud. He leapt over red rivulets and stumbled into a nearby glade. He ran throughout the afternoon, deeper and deeper into the woods until the madness became noise and the noise faded to the distant sighs of cannons and the faint clamor of battle. And when he was finally certain he was safe, he stopped. He curled into a ball on the ground and wept. He tore roots from the ground and threw rocks at chirping birds. Then he decided to move on, as far away as he could imagine.

The unexpected gunshot had echoed through the woods as soon as he stood while the sun still shone in the crisp blue. He had crashed to the ground, his scream shattering the peace of the place. He remembered frantically clawing at the dirt, scrambling to the oak to cower behind it, bloody hands painting the thick roots crimson.

They had sat like that for hours, the boy and his unseen enemy, whoever and wherever he was. Shooting at each other blindly, tearing the woods apart, splintering bark and ripping flowers from their stems. Shooting through the afternoon and into dusk until one shot was the last shot and the glade fell silent.

"And then you came..." the boy's voice had weakened to a hoarse whisper. "To save me."

"I cannot save you," the shepherd said as he stepped over the fire. He held the soldier's hands. The flames reflected in his eyes vanished, replaced by a sheen of tears.

The boy's eyes shimmered as he sensed the heaviness falling over his lids. The layer of gold leaves was softer than clouds, the song of the twilight woods soothed his soul and the pain disappeared. A flash of fear flitted across his face, but it was soon replaced by serenity.

"These are prince's berries," the shepherd opened his hand and showed three shiny white berries. "For the pain... Sleep, soldier in the woods."

The boy was already gone. There was no smile on his face, nor the tormented rictus that often haunts the wounded.

The shepherd passed his hand over the soldier's eyes and rose. He kicked the fire out, gathered his pot and stick and cloak, and strode back into the shadows.

There was still much work to be done.

A hundred paces from there, a boy lay in the woods with his back against an elm and a red hole in the chest pocket of his brown uniform, not knowing where the bullet had come from nor why.